

## A Christian's Righteousness

*Matthew 5<sup>17-32</sup>*

The scribes and the Pharisees set themselves apart from the rest of the population in terms of obedience to God's word. Indeed, the very word "Pharisee" probably means "separatist". They calculated that the Scriptures contain some 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they aspired to keep them all. The average man in Palestine in Jesus' day said to himself, "Ah, there is very little hope of my ever being as good as the scribes and the Pharisees. They are outstanding; they live exemplary lives."

But the scribes and Pharisees were far better at arithmetic than true obedience. Many of them were legalists who measured piety by compliance with such rules as those for Sabbath, fasting, kosher food, and ritual purification. Others among them were libertines who asserted their freedom from the law. They tried to make the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive.

In truth the Bible is negated by the legalism that reduces it to a set of rules and regulations and by the libertinism that wants all gift and no demand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus rejects both fallacies; he offers a third option. The only way to honor the Bible is to seek its underlying intention and then incorporate its purpose into one's personal lifestyle. In other words, Jesus came to deepen not destroy the law's demands. In today's passage (5:17-32) he explains the true intentions of the sixth and seventh commandments (the prohibitions against murder and adultery) as well as God's intention for marriage. In each case Jesus shows or illustrates how Christian righteousness surpasses pharisaic righteousness.

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1. Every family has its rules & regulations. As a kid, which family rule did you love breaking? Why?
2. **Read Matthew 5:17-20.** What do you think Jesus means when he says, "I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets], but to fulfill them"?
3. The Pharisees were famous for their righteousness and meticulous attention to every detail of the Law. How in the world can our righteousness possibly surpass theirs (v.20)?
4. **Read Matthew 5:21-26.** "We can think of Jesus fulfilling the Law in this way; Jesus treats the Law as if it were a great arc. He extends the line of the arc around to its fulfillment, the circle for which it was originally designed" (Earl Palmer). In verses 21-22, how does Jesus' illustration complete the circle?



5. Jesus gives a practical application of vv.21-22 in vv.23-26. What do these verses teach us about broken relationships?

If we offend someone, why is it so important that we go to him or her immediately?

6. **Read Matthew 5:27-30.** How does Jesus complete the circle of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14)? I.e. According to Jesus, what is the commandment's positive & greater purpose?

7. Is Jesus advocating that his disciples should literally main their bodies in order to preserve fidelity in relationships? If he doesn't intend that we should follow such severe advice literally, then what does he intend?
8. Why do you think divorce is such a problem today? How has divorce touched your life?
9. **Read Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9.** In Jesus' day, Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was permitted only in extreme cases. Rabbi Hillel taught that it was permitted for any and every reason. Indeed, a man could divorce his wife if she burned his supper or if he found a prettier woman. How does this help us to understand the Pharisees' "test" question (19:3)?
10. Jesus points back to the first marriage in Genesis. What does it teach us about God's intention for marriage (19:4-6)? Do Jesus' words also address today's views of same-sex marriage?
11. The Pharisees refer to Moses' instructions about divorce as a "command" (19:7). What does Jesus' reply teach us about divorce (19:8)?

In what ways might divorce reveal the hardness of our hearts?

12. What similarities and differences are there between 19:9 and 5:31-32?

How do these verses stress the seriousness of divorce and how do they differ with today's view on marriage and divorce?

13. In Thornton Wilder's play, The Skin of our Teeth, the character Mrs. Antrobus says to her husband, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect...I married you because you gave me a promise." She takes off her ring and looks at it. "That promise made up for your faults and the promise I made to you made up from mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage." Do you agree with Mrs. Antrobus? Why or why not?
14. In each of the above illustrations (5:21-32), Jesus has preserved the worth and meaning of human personality and relationships. Neither anger, nor lust, nor divorce are permitted to destroy relationships with other people. How would your parents or children evaluate you on this passage? How could you grow in these areas of your life?

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**PRAYER:** "Lord, I am an unworthy person, I have accepted the gift of your kingdom without really considering what it is an appropriate lifestyle for me as a child of the Kingdom. I am afraid I have obscured for others the true vision of life in the Kingdom. I have robbed myself of the joy of total commitment to your way. Now that I see this, help me to catch the real spirit of the Kingdom. Let me not live with the law as a requirement to be met but a guideline to go beyond. Through Jesus, whose understanding of these things sustained him even in the horror of crucifixion. AMEN.